Envisaging the Future of Republicanism in France

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To Thierry Ménissier, France's republicanism is not a thing of the past. In fact, the republican regime is still the best guarantee of liberty in France, but only if it is overhauled so that it takes on board the important role of political participation. Republicanism's continuing relevance requires that it get back in touch with the classical republican tradition.

Reviewed here: Thierry Ménissier, *La liberté des contemporains. Pourquoi il faut rénover la république* (Contemporary Liberty: Why We Must Overhaul the Republic), Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2011, 273 pp., 24.90 euros.

Overhauling the Republic

In the political vocabulary of France, the word "republic" has a special status as a perennial point of reference. Transcending the diversity of political opinions and choices, "the Republic" is the basis of the civic identity of the French, in the sense that it embodies a certain idea of democracy, which was able to establish the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity after a very turbulent national history. Although republicanism is still central, it is nevertheless now increasingly discussed and disputed. Opposing the republicans who vigorously defend the virtues of the French system and its universalist demands are democrats who criticize deviations from republicanism by the French state, which they say is insufficiently enthusiastic about individual rights and pluralism. This democratic questioning takes two paths: first, rejecting a model that is obsolete because it is ill adapted to the characteristics of modern societies, and second, preferring to preserve this model by "overhauling" it, i.e. by adapting to the present the original responses that the tradition of

republican thinking made to several social and political problems. In *La liberté des contemporains*: *Pourquoi il faut rénover la république* (Contemporary Liberty: Why We Must Overhaul the Republic), Thierry Ménissier takes the second path. He notes that with the multiple effects of globalization "the republican reference appears singularly blurred," and he nevertheless proposes to "save the principle" by outlining an authentically republican normative theory, which he defines as a "set of concepts with enough credibility" both to assist thinking about reality and to encourage political action (p. 97).

"Standard Republicanism"

Thus the book starts off from the conviction that there is a republican "principle" – irreducible to the principles of political liberalism – which we can distil from the variety of usages of the republican idea and attach to a kind of ideal type, which the author calls "standard republicanism" (p. 23). This standard republicanism is based on the fundamental insight of collective action related to "the common thing," which implies a "specific anthropology" and a "political morality irreducible to any other." In the first part of his book, Ménissier reviews the various legacies that form the republican heritage, from Aristotle to Rousseau by way of Cicero, and he highlights the essential role that the civic community plays in giving people access to liberty and allowing them to influence their destiny. He still finds credible the real and positive unity expressed by political fraternity, in spite of the blurring of boundaries caused by globalization and the obsolescence of the nation-state, discredited within by multicultural movements and without by the construction of post-national political entities like the European Union. To defend this position and to rekindle the unifying potential of the republican principle, the rest of the book proceeds in two stages. In the second part, the author analyses the historical, political and theoretical changes that make the overhaul of standard republicanism necessary, and the third part puts forward some proposals that would bring these changes into the republican model.

"Contemporary Liberty"

So the originality of this book is its clear intention to defend the character of the tradition of republican thinking without denying the relevance of liberal critiques. Staging a return to the perennial opposition between the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns, Ménissier sees in it a "real dialectic" in the Kantian sense (p. 114), in which each theoretical position is constantly referring back to the other, and from which it is essential to

escape. “Contemporary Liberty” thus demands that standard republicanism be reformulated in the light of the anthropological changes of modernity, where liberalism has been both a sign and a cause. Ménissier establishes this point by means of a “genealogy of interested behaviour” (Chapter 5), in which he shows how the category of individual interest – and, through this genealogy and this category, the central ideas of the “dignity of the domestic forum” and private property (pp. 129-130) – have gradually become integral to modern subjectivity.

However, this historical evolution does not invalidate republicanism’s “major anthropological insight” (p. 175), either with regard to the scope of the concept of the general will, or with regard to citizens’ capacity to launch themselves into such an abstraction. On the first point, Ménissier makes an interesting proposal for “recomposing the general interest” (Chapter 7). Building on recent developments in theories of participative and deliberative democracy (whose relationship with standard republicanism is not free of contradictions), he envisages systematizing the exchange between the institutional and non-institutional forms of public debate, with a view to setting up a dialogue between the “social interests” expressed in unelected bodies (such as juries and deliberative assemblies) and “the public interest” expressed by the traditional instruments of political representation. He sees this being done without the former being simply subordinate to the latter, and without forgetting the latter’s dynamics of an extending generality; out of this comes an agonistic, dynamic balance, which a third term – “the general interest” – is meant to express. Thus the liberal anthropology of interested behaviour does not definitively discredit Rousseau’s insight about the capacity of citizens to get out of the narrow logic of private interest and to launch themselves into the general will. In fact, contemporary liberty depends on reactivity in the set of procedures and initiatives that encourage the formation of collective judgement, such as those that Ménissier sees in the field of aesthetics, where, with the multiplication of literary prizes, the opinions of non-professional readers are increasingly sought, in spite of all the established experts (Chapter 8). Contemporary liberty requires that taking notice of interested behaviour not be an endorsement of a “proprietorial” concept of private property; on the contrary, it encourages a return to the theoretical models (republican solidarity and Rawlsian institutional desert) that follow Rousseau in trying to reconcile the right to a sphere of private life with the need for social solidarity (Chapter 9).

A Too Traditional Contemporary Liberty?

Although the desire to revive the tradition of republican thought in light of the characteristics of contemporary subjectivity is perfectly laudable, the way that Ménissier sets about doing this is somewhat surprising. Claiming the legacy of Machiavelli and adopting the stance of an "advisor" who "sees what is possible by exploiting the culture's resources" (p. 18), Ménissier reconstructs the standard form of republicanism by mining with great erudition the traditional republican texts and generally by extracting from the republican and liberal canon the philosophical problems to be addressed and the concepts to be called upon. The resulting position is quite paradoxical: it defends the contemporary character of republican liberty without really engaging in the contemporary debate about it. Ménissier does mention the writings of those who, like him, have recently sought to apply liberal correctives to republicanism – such as Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit and John Maynor in the English-speaking world, and Cécile Laborde and Jean-Fabien Spitz in the French – but without getting into any detailed consideration of their arguments, and this leaves us with some unresolved problems.

Ménissier does not join in the debate with neo-republicanism (which he calls "civic liberalism"), because "it does not appear to conceive of the issues of civic commitment in terms of the competence of a collective political subject. A fundamental difference between standard republicanism and neo-republicanism arises from the fact that the terms 'people' and 'nation' are never referred to as possible sources of civic community" (p. 47). In other words, Ménissier gives no detailed discussion of the neo-republicans' position, because he thinks they are too liberal to be included in standard republicanism. However, he thereby misses the opportunity to clarify what distinguishes his "contemporary liberty" from "liberty as non-domination" (as Pettit defines it). Yet these are converging theoretical positions, both of which seek to understand the political dimension of liberty while also leaving a place for private liberties. For Pettit, liberty as non-domination remains a negative form of liberty, which does not impose any substantial conception of the good life, but is nevertheless not equivalent to the liberal form of liberty, reduced to simple non-interference; and which highlights the usefulness of political contestation in order to make the most of the fact of not being dominated. For his part, Ménissier vigorously resists any strictly instrumental justification of political participation, as suggested by his numerous references to Aristotle and to the fact that civic life is inherently good for individuals; but at the same time, he

emphasizes the inevitability of the liberty of the moderns from now on, and this makes for a serious ambiguity: to what extent does political participation rest on a true good, once we take seriously the value pluralism that follows from the respect for private liberties? Does contemporary liberty remain perfectionist, like civic humanism, or does it prefer the quasi-perfectionism defended by John Maynor? [1]

Ménissier's tendency to give civic participation a rather instrumental value, as the neo-republicans do, is especially evident in the fact that his model of the "recomposed" general interest is very close to Pettit's model of contestatory democracy[2]: do not both models in effect seek to correct the faults of representative democracy by authorizing the expression of individuals' points of view, of "social interests," as a way of adjusting the general interest point of view to the diversity found in social reality? Moreover, it is astonishing to see Ménissier explicitly claiming the figure of Machiavelli to set up his model, thus taking on board the legacy of neo-Roman republicanism, which is open to the virtues of social pluralism and political confrontation, but which hardly accords with the neo-Athenian themes of civic *philia* and patriotic fraternity that he promotes in other passages. So the frontier separating neo-republican "civic liberalism" from Ménissier's liberal republicanism is not nearly as obvious as he claims, and needs more explanation.

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[1] John Maynor, *Republicanism in the Modern World*, Cambridge (UK) and Malden MA (USA), Polity, 2003, p. 80.
[2] Philip Pettit, "Minority Claims under Two Conceptions of Democracy," in Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton and Will Sanders (eds.), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 199-215.